

Religion and Authority in Colonial Education

“Come over and help us,” a Native American is depicted as saying while standing as the central figure on the Seal of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay, 1629. This figure is holding an arrow in one hand and a bow in the other; a band of leaves covers his midsection.¹ Undoubtedly, English colonists sincerely believed they were bringing a superior civilization to a “heathen” and “uncivilized” people. This seal symbolized the feelings of cultural superiority that the English brought to the soil of North America.

To the surprise of colonists, Native Americans did not rush to accept the offer of religious and cultural conversion. Native Americans responded by offering food and aid, which made it possible for Europeans to survive and expand while Indians experienced the catastrophic effects of European-introduced diseases. For Native Americans, the primary problem presented by the European invasion was physical and cultural survival. Frequently, this meant warfare or finding a means of protecting cultural traditions while adapting to the social and economic changes brought by Europeans.

For English colonists, the cultural resistance of Native Americans was an affront to the teachings of Christ and a hindrance to colonial expansion. Motivated by sincere religious convictions and a belief in the superiority of English culture, European Americans engaged in an educational crusade to turn “heathen” and “uncivilized” Indians into models of Protestant and English culture.

It is my hypothesis that the educational crusade for the religious and cultural conversion of Native Americans contributed to the nineteenth-century vision of the public school as the primary means for ending crime, poverty, and social and political conflict. As I will argue in later chapters, there was little difference in the minds of nineteenth-century Protestant public school advocates between “savage” Indians, unrepentant criminals, the rebellious poor, and the “heathen” Irish-Catholic immigrants. In fact, the English and Protestant sense of cultural and moral superiority originally developed during the twelfth-century English

invasion of Ireland. Many English colonialists likened the “savage” Indian to the “savage” Irish.²

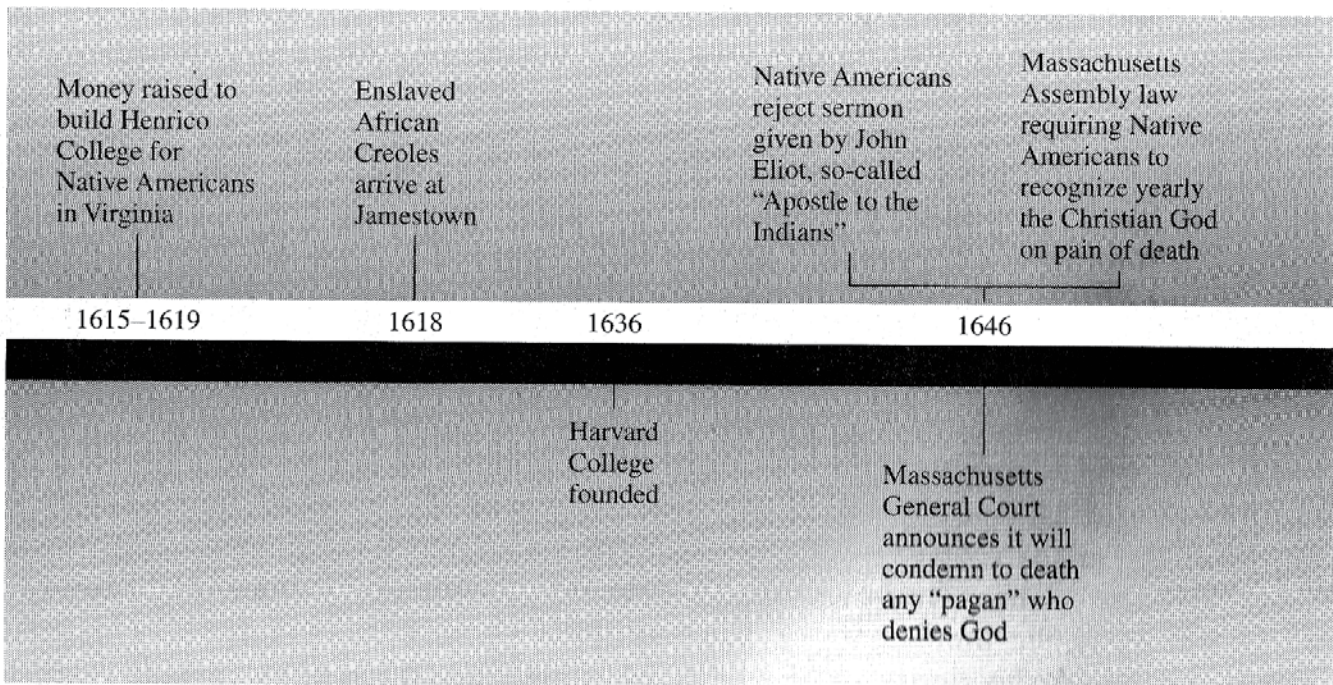
The 1629 Seal of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay also symbolizes to many historians the colonial dedication to education and the establishment of schools. Traditionally, the educational policies of the Massachusetts Bay Colony are considered the precursors to the development of public schooling in the United States and to the belief that public schools could end crime, eliminate poverty, provide equality of opportunity, improve the economy, train workers, and create social and political stability. This belief in the power of schooling set the agenda for educational discussions through the twentieth century.

Therefore, I am beginning the story of the American school by focusing on the educational policies of the New England colonies. This discussion will provide a necessary background for understanding the development of public schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN COLONIAL SOCIETY

Colonial education illustrates some important social functions of education. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, education in colonial New England was used to maintain the authority of the government and religion. People were taught to read and write so that they could obey the laws of God and the state. In addition, education in Puritan New England, with its emphasis on individual conduct, bore the seeds for the nineteenth- and twentieth-century view of education as a panacea

TIME LINE OF COLONIAL EDUCATION

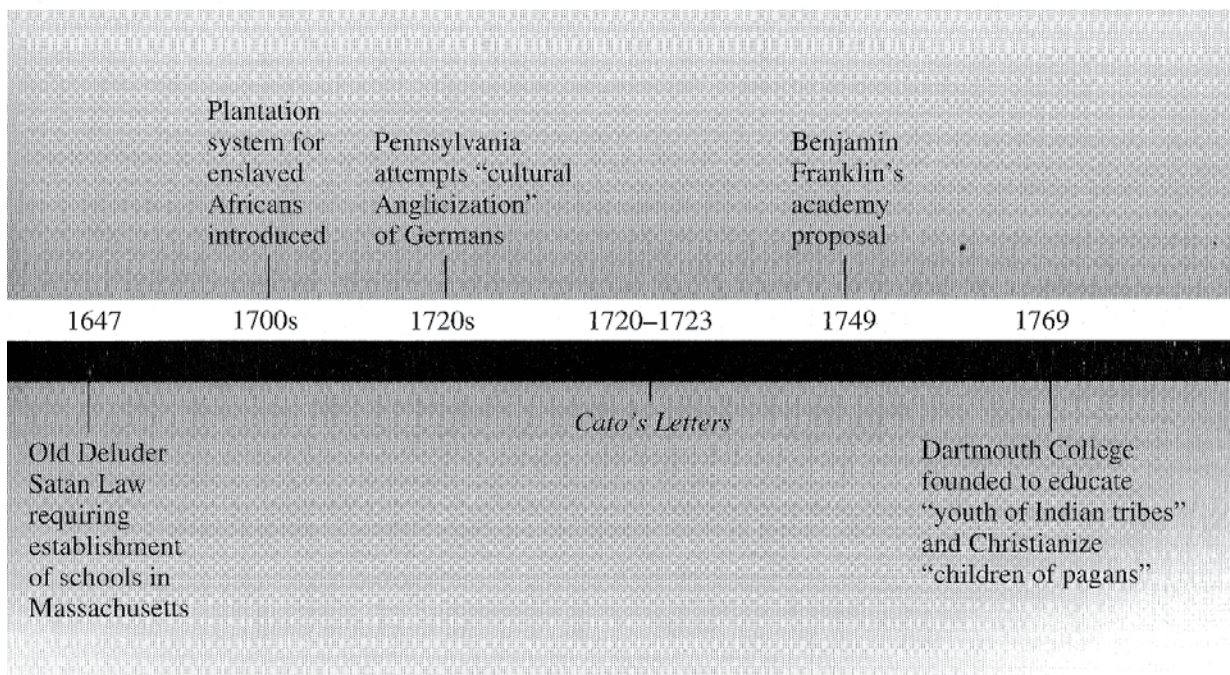


for society. This view can be traced to the Protestant Reformation, one result of which was an emphasis on individual instruction for the development of piety with the goal of creating “the good society.” Whether or not education can create the good society continues to be an important question.

In addition, education in the colonies helped to maintain social distinctions. For many, the learning of Latin and Greek in grammar schools or with tutors and attendance at a college were a means of maintaining or gaining elite status. For others, attendance at an academy was the key to social mobility. From the seventeenth century to present times, there has been a continuous debate over the role of the school in creating social classes and providing for social mobility.

Also, education was increasingly considered a means of improving the material prosperity of society. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some colonialists and Europeans believed that scientific research would improve the quality of life for all people. They believed that the key to scientific research was freedom of thought and the freedom to pursue any form of inquiry. In England, the quest for intellectual freedom resulted in the establishment of academies that, eventually, were transplanted to the American colonies.

The concern about the advancement of science and intellectual freedom raised issues regarding the control of education. As I will discuss in this chapter, some people argued that intellectual freedom could be achieved only by separating schools from religious organizations that were supported by governments. It was argued that government-supported church schools primarily taught obedience to God and the state and, consequently, limited freedom of thought. Others argued that any control by government over education would result in despotism over the mind and a limitation of free inquiry because government officials would always use education to support their own power. The concern about freedom of thought



sparked debates about whether or not education should be secular and controlled by government. Similar debates about the role of education in providing material benefits to society and the control of schools continue to present times.

Colonial education also illustrates the relationship between education and concepts of the child and family. Throughout the history of education, concepts of childhood and youth have played important roles in determining methods of instruction. A child who is thought of as being born good is treated quite differently from one who is considered to be born evil. The authoritarian quality of colonial education reflects an authoritarian family structure and a belief that the inherent evil of childhood needed to be controlled.

The effort to change Native American cultures was a prelude to future debates about multicultural education. The issue would gain added importance with the seventeenth-century arrival of enslaved Africans. Schools would continue to play a leading role in attempting to unify indigenous and immigrant populations.

In summary, these themes in colonial education continue to the present:

- Education is still considered, by some, a means of preparing children to obey the authority of the government.
- People still think that education can function as a social panacea by eliminating crime, immorality, and poverty.
- Education is still considered, by some, a means of maintaining social class differences.
- Many people still believe in the power of schools to provide social mobility.
- Debates continue about the potential of government-operated schools to inhibit intellectual freedom.
- Multicultural education remains an important issue.

My discussion of these themes in colonial education will begin with the education's role in maintaining authority and social differences in colonial New England. This will be followed by an examination of educational policies and efforts to educate Native Americans. Throughout this chapter, I will be relating these themes to different historical interpretations of the colonial period. A goal of this book is to help readers understand the importance of a historian's interpretation of our images of the past. Different historians have emphasized different themes in interpreting the development of colonial education.